school Mckeen

ASTORIA
JUN 3
11 30PM
1946
OREG.

Mrs H. Olson
Jewel
Oregon

(COPY)

May 15, 1946

Mrs. Violet Foster, Clerk
The Board of Directors
Nehalem Valley Union High School
Jewell, Oregon

Dear Mrs. Foster:

I have during the present week-end definitely decided to resign my position as Principal of Nehalem Valley Union High School.

Doubtless I should have done this several months ago, specifically at the time the Board of Directors, acting on the request of a pathetically ignorant, narrow-minded, and malicious element, chose to dictate to me, a professional teacher and administrator, the books that might or might not be permitted in the School Library or used in English classes.

Not only did the Directors officially order me to remove from the library Strange Fruit and The Grapes of Wrath and all books having words or references that might be construed as being similarly naughty, they expressed the view, in regular meeting, that I should seize all such books that pupils might bring to the building, refuse to accept reports on any of them for English credit, and notify the parents of all violations.

Regarding this attitude several statements are apropo.

First, it is preposterous for the Directors to presume to dictate regarding the books that may or may not be used. The selection of materials for a particular class, and for particular members of that class, is properly the teacher's and administrators' duty. Certainly it should not be the function of laymen who, being neither educators nor psychologists, have little technical or scientific knowledge of the materials or the pupils for whom they are procured. If a teacher or administrator is denied an authority so clearly professional, his professional status is vastly inferior to that of a plumber. Laymen do not tell a plumber what wrenches or other tools he may or may not use in work in which technical knowledge and judgment are required.

Second, our Library service this year was planned for adults as well as pupils. The County Librarian and I have followed a plan that I suggested and he enthusiastically approved last summer---to maintain in our Library a branch of the County Library, where adult members of the community as well as childred might obtain good books. The fact that the adults do not in general read good books, and the further fact that they did not respond to the opportunity we offered them, are criticisms of their literary interests and appreciations, not of my efforts to serve.

Third, I cannot teach modern literature if I am not permitted to use the books of novelists who in the course of great realistic portrayals of life present with fidelity the manners, morals, and indeed the speech of real people. We cannot rear our pupils on Stratton-Porter, Zane Grey, and other authors approved by the Directors, who, though they have written books, have somehow neglected to produce literature. The American Novel has, in my opinion, surpassed the British since the First World War; but if I teach the American Novel, or even permit my pupils to learn its history or highest development, I must acquaint them with writers whom the Directors and others think they should not know.

Fourth, I am too conscientious to acquiesce in the plan to keep the young people from knowing our best contemporary literature. I should not like our graduates to say, among a group of informed, cultured men and women, "Oh, yes, I know our best literature; we read Grey, Stratton-Porter, and Bower in Nehalem Valley High".

Fifth, the youngsters in our School who write, speak, or sketch indecently, (we have them) are not readers of the books the Directors condemn. They read cheap westerns and other books that are not classified as literature.

Sixth, it is puerile nonsense to suppose, as some do, that Juniors and Seniors cannot understand our best modern American novelists. If upper classmen can comprehend Shakespeare and Milton, who have traditionally been required, they can surely understand Dreiser, Dos Passos, and

Steinbeck. Our Juniors and Seniors are young men and women, not children. I have no sympathy with the view that they are biologically immature and hence unable to realize or understand the problems of the mature organism. We do them a grievous disservice when in mistaken solicitude we feed them on literary pap and try to keep them in a world of illusion and make-believe. We should help, not hinder, their growing process.

Seventh, a novel like The Grapes of Wrath or Strange Fruit drives home the facts about great social problems when a mere factual presentation fails to do so.

Eighth, neither of the books specifically condemned has been required reading in my classes (I do not teach English below the Junior year), though the local critics have said they are. How odd that people deeply concerned, from the traditional religious point of view, about the morality of our best novels should be so little concerned about the morality of their own quite inexcusable falsehoods!

Two years ago, when I became Principal, your school had reached its all-time low. It was known throughout the State as one of the worst of the Problem Schools. I had many difficulties to overcome, but we ended the first year very successfully. These statements can be supported with a mass of factual data. I have been told that my predecessor kept within easy reach a piece of metal pipe as protection against his Problem Children and their Problem Parents. This is understandable when one remembers that parents called at the School with the intention of fighting him. He has been quoted as having said, in reference to the pipe, "I'll use it on these outlaws, so help me God!".

This year we had a very satisfactory school situation during the months of 1945. Then it became known in the community that Mr. Borden, who had taught in the High School several years, and had served as Principal for one, was returning from the Army. I had never been informed that he had been promised the Principalship after his release. I had been urged to remain for the school year 1945-46, and was given an increase of $600 in salary. Last year, in September, 1944, I had been offered $800 more to go elsewhere, to a bigger job, but had kept my contract with you. This year I could have had many offers. Actually I had returned only because I wanted to finish the work I had started and carried forward a good way during the preceding year. I was not notified of Mr. Borden's intention to return till late this spring, but had months before decided not to live another term in such cultural isolation. Mr. Borden accepted a position at Warrenton High, which he subsequently resigned. He spent much of his time in the District, fishing, visiting friends, and talking. This situation served well the purposes of those persons (perhaps you have always had too many) who would rather tear the School down than work with those who are able to build it up. I heard later, from a good source, that a friend of Mr. Borden's had said at the time, "The best thing Borden can do is move on".

Since Mr. Borden's return, the daughter of your Chairman, who had previously been cooperative, has been our Number One Problem Girl, discourteous, rude, ill-mannered, a disturbing element throughout the School. Mr. Borden is, of course, a personal friend of your Chairman, who, regrettably, has seemed to be of her daughter's humor since his arrival. This girl, like most of our pupils, has a mind darkened by race prejudice, particularly prejudice against the Jews. I have for two years sought to teach my pupils the facts and morals of the race question as science sees them. Much good has come of this, but the old phobias are still strong. Not long ago, in my Socio-Economic Problems class, my presentation of the scientific facts about race was met by an emotional anti-Semitic outburst. The daughter of your Chairman informed me (everyone in the class heard her) that no one in the community agreed with me on the race question, and that next year they would have a Principal who did not like Jews as I did.

In this matter as in others these people desire a teacher or Principal who will assure them that their own mistaken judgments and prejudices are truths. I am proud to say I conceive my duty as an educator to be somewhat different.

One of our most important duties is to help our youngsters develop their appreciation of art, literature, and science. Taste can and must be cultivated. If one cannot help in this way, one is indeed a poor teacher.

Even presentation of the concept of evolution is shocking to many of our pupils. They would like me to tell them I do not believe this fundamental concept of modern thought, that I think it untrue. Unfortunately for this wish, however, I, like other informed persons, consider it a fundamental law of life.

Your School is now established on a firm, progressive basis, but I could have done more for it if there had been cooperation where I had every right to expect it. Aside from the attitudes that the community prejudices I have mentioned have shaped in many pupils, I have no problem in regard to discipline. Whenever there is trouble, it can be traced to a source outside the School.

It is precisely this gravely unethical attitude that impels me to resign. I will not tolerate, nor will I be silent regarding, the contemptible, small-minded agitation that persons outside the School have carried on even among our own pupils.

I have no further intention of giving my time, energy, and professional skill to a School in a community where many people who should cooperate choose instead to sabotage and lie about one's efforts.

I am filing this protest and possibly sacrificing two weeks' salary in the interest of your School, the pupils with whom I have worked there two years, and the pupils who will follow; in the interest of boys and girls everywhere for whom the fullest educational opportunities may be denied by the prejudices of people old enough to know better; in the interest, too, of education generally and the professionalization of the teacher's and school administrator's job.

Ample money has been given Mr. Charles to enable him to have the premises where I have been living cleaned thoroughly throughout. I am leaving the bed, springs, and heater, for which I paid Mr. Gwynn eight dollars.

Enclosed herewith is a statement covering most of the school expenses I have paid during the year. I shall appreciate having your check in this amount and in the amount due for salary. I gave all my keys to Miss Caldwell in Portland this week-end.

The substitute whom you engage can doubtless carry on for the two weeks that remain. There are only nine school days. He will find all records in the office. A speaker has been engaged for Commencement. He is Dr. Carlyn Winger, Professor of Speech at Oregon State College, the title of whose address will be "The Divine Insanity of Noble Minds.

It may interest you to know that my protest regarding the monstrous, deliberately contrived situation at Jewell has the support of the great national professional organizations and the American Civil Liberties Union.

In the interest of the professionalization of teaching and fuller, richer educational opportunities for young people,

Very truly yours,

COLIN McEWEN

'Grapes' Case Flares Anew

Colin McEwen, principal of the Nehalem Valley high school at Jewell who resigned rather than obey the school board's order to remove the "Grapes of Wrath" and "Strange Fruit" from library shelves, has handed the retort blistering to the Oregon Education association.

McEwen's denunciation in the form of a letter was aimed at the ethics committee of the Oregon teachers' organization which last week took its stand for the Jewell school board, declaring that that body acted within its rights in demanding removal of the two books. While professing "wholehearted" support of the principle of academic freedom, the ethics committee based its action on the state law and said that "local control over community education is one of the basic and traditional features of our democratic society."

Lack of Backing Scored

The Nehalem valley principal, who was not dismissed, but resigned before school closed, charged the teachers' organization with failure to back the educators who comprise its membership. "The concept of democracy and academic freedom that you urge would make the intellectual life of the schools the football of the caprice and prejudice of any local group persuasive or powerful enough to influence the board," he asserted.

McEwen quoted from letters he has received from the American Federation of Teachers, the American Education fellowship, the American Civil Liberties union and from the Clatsop county library, all commending his stand with regard to the removal of the two books. Teachers throughout the state, he said, will compare the action of the ethics committee with the attitude of these other educational groups.

21.026.013 1 of 3